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ABSTRACT

This study considers student development, focusing on religious change, from social psychological perspectives. The interplay between views of the college environment and the religious self was examined as a way to understand the internal processes of four undergraduate students who underwent a religious change from the Catholic faith. The methodological approach was qualitative. Narrative inquiry uncovered the individuals' inner processes and perceptions of their environment and themselves. Interview analysis showed that students' social and academic communities largely affected their religious identities. Both aspects of the college environment contributed to a more independent self that sometimes incorporated prior Catholic beliefs. (Contains 53 references.) (SLD)

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Changing Worlds, Changing Selves:

The Experience of the Religious Self among Catholic Collegians

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Abstract

This study broadens our current understanding of student development, especially religious change, from social psychological perspectives. The interplay between views of the college environment and the religious self are examined as a way to understand the internal processes of college students who underwent a religious change from the Catholic faith. The methodological approach employed is qualitative. Specifically, narrative inquiry uncovers individuals' inner processes and perceptions of their environment and of themselves. Based on the interview analyses, it finds that students' social and academic community largely affected their religious identity. Both aspects of the college environment contributed to a more independent self with greater agency, which further led to a redefined spiritual self that sometimes incorporated prior Catholic beliefs.

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Changing Worlds, Changing Selves:

The Experience of the Religious Self among Catholic Collegians

Late adolescence and early adulthood have been noted as the "impressionable years," when attitudes are susceptible to change, as late teens leave their home environments and begin to establish individual identities (Sears, 1989). These years also signify the period when most students enter higher education. In addition to the impressionability of students within this age group, the college itself would also affect changes in beliefs and attitudes. Walsh and Charalambides (1989) have demonstrated that significant belief change is likely to occur when message information is high in importance, novelty, and plausibility, all conditions common to higher educational settings. For such reasons, it is not surprising that higher education scholars have proposed that college attendance makes an impact on student beliefs and identities, such as their political identity, cultural identity, and sexual identity.

While much student development research has focused on identities related to race and gender, one important aspect that has been largely neglected is one's religious identity. Despite this lack of attention in student development research, ethnicity, gender, *and* religion have been ranked as the most salient social identities among undergraduates (Garza and Herringer, 1986). Erik Erikson (1964) identified religion as an important domain of identity that is evident in the process of self-discovery. Moreover, sociologists have pointed out that religion is a worldview and belief system (Berger, 1973). Religion provides the inner framework for moral meanings, values, and purpose. Thus, the study of religious change is more than simply one of the many facets of student identity. Religious beliefs or lack thereof, offer insight into human drives, hopes, and reasoning, as well as perceptions of the self in relation to others and the physical world. The processes

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of religious change offer insights into the internal transformations of one's self-concept as well as one's worldview.

However, researchers have empirically demonstrated a decline of religiosity during the college years (Astin, 1993; Bowen, 1997; Cox, 1988). Astin (1993) finds a drop in church attendance and reports of prayer and saying grace before meals. These behaviors are reflective of changing religious attitudes. Studies also reveal that students are less favorable towards the church, less convinced of the reality of God, less favorable towards the observance of the Sabbath, less fundamental, and less conservative (Bowen 1997). Others have identified the leading predictors of religious apostasy, one of which includes college attendance (Hadaway and Roof, 1988). Though the internal processes have not been well investigated, such findings suggest that for many students, higher education can be a secularizing experience.

In order to understand the internal processes of religious decline among collegians, I employed theoretical concepts in social psychology that suggest that individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and identities are influenced by their perceived surroundings. In application, I investigated and interpreted participants' perceptions of their college experience and how these interpretations relate to their changed religious identity. By way of in-depth interviews and narrative inquiries, I researched students, who held to a particular religious identity, at a large public research institution, the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

Literature Review

First, in order to demonstrate the role of religiosity within the larger context of student development, I will introduce the major theories guiding this study. I will review higher education theories regarding the impact of college on the processes of identity

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formation, specifically, psychosocial theories and person-environment theories. These theories provide the underlying premises that the college environment interrelates with one's sense of self. Although student development theories have recognized the complex processes of defining oneself, they do not address the development of the religious self. Thus, I will include in this section, literature from sociology and social psychology that more specifically relates the role of the environment to one's religious identity. Finally, these theories will be integrated to develop a theoretical framework for the study.

Theoretical Context of Student Development

The study of student development proposes multiple ways to explain how the individual develops his/her identity during the college years. Erikson, the father of psychosociology, was the first to examine the inner self beyond the internal stages of development and emphasized the role of the social context on identity formation. He outlined eight periods, or tasks, of psychosocial development, one of which includes a challenge that is likely to occur during late adolescence (when most individuals enter college), identity versus identity diffusion. Erikson viewed individual development as a process in which individuals must confront and overcome a series of challenges in the environment. His claims produced a family of psychosocial theories that emphasized sociocultural influences as key factors in development. Student development, therefore, is not limited to the study of an individual's inner process of development during the college years. Rather, the study of student development involves a broadened understanding of the interplay between the individual and the environment in the construction of one's identity.

However, the dialectic relationship between the self and the environment should also take into account differing perceptions of the environment. One category of student

development theories, person-environment theories, supposes that individuals can conceive of the same experience and environment differently, depending upon their own level of development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The category of person-environment theories gives credence to the weight of perceptions as part of the college environment. Hence, explanations of student identity formation should not only account for the physical environment, but also its various perceptions.

Self as a Social Construction

Identity formation and changes in perceptions of the surrounding environment are not easily separated. Rather, they are interfaced. Mead (1962) explained the self and its development as arising from social experiences. He suggests that the self is profoundly social and not only a mere product, but also a social process, a continuous interchange between "I" and "me." In his own words, "The 'I' reacts to the self, which arises through taking the attitudes of others. Through taking those attitudes, we have introduced the 'me' and react to it as an 'I.' The 'I' is the response of the individual as this appears in his own experience" (p. 22). According to Mead, the self is an object as well as a subject that are in constant social process. He also emphasizes that the self only exists in relation to the selves of others. Thus, identities are understood within memberships of a given community. As the immediate community changes, so might one's sense of self.

According to social constructionists, human nature is not basic or fundamental; it depends upon its cultural surroundings to give meaning to perceived realities. Cushman (1995) explains that interpretations of the world require a "cultural matrix," which enables individuals to conceive of their world and their place in it, as well as the rules, relations, and responsibilities that govern their choices and behaviors. Cultural matrixes, such as religion, vary across specific historical and cultural experiences, which form

individual perspectives, or "cultural artifacts." Thus, according to Cushman, the task of research is to develop understanding about the contextual meanings and functions of cultural artifacts because an understanding of the self requires an understanding of the individual's social context. In short, the self is not universal or transhistorical, but constructed by local frames of cultural references.

Religious Change as a Social Construction

But what happens to individuals' religious beliefs and self-perceptions upon entering a pluralistic environment, such as college? To understand how students' religious beliefs and their identities are affected during the college years, I will first introduce James Fowler's theory on faith development and expand on two particular stages that relate to the late adolescence and early adulthood, a stage when most students are in college. These two stages are the crux of this study; they point to the individuation of religious beliefs within the larger context of faith development. I will then explain Peter Berger's theory on the relativizing effects of a pluralistic environment, as an expanded explanation of the processes of religious change in the university setting.

The college years are pivotal times for religious change. According to Fowler (1981), people progress in the following six stages of faith development: intuitive-projective faith (early childhood), mythic-literal faith (childhood and beyond), synthetic-conventional faith (adolescence and beyond), intuitive-reflective faith (young adulthood and beyond), conjunctive faith (mid-life and beyond), and universalizing faith (mid-life and beyond). During stage three, synthetic-conventional faith, adolescents begin to take multiple perspectives in terms of identity as well as values. Progression towards stage four, intuitive-reflective faith, is marked by personal responsibility for their commitments, beliefs, and values. Beliefs can be confirmed or abandoned through

challenges to religious thought, often by way of contradictions between authority sources and relativistic points of view. Such challenges can arise through various means, such as curriculum, peer culture, and classroom instruction.

Interestingly, Fowler's stage three and stage four parallel Erikson's identity development theory also support the notion that the college years are pivotal in individual identity formation. The parallel between these stages from these two theories suggests that the processes of personal faith building and identity formation be intertwined. Fowler's faith development theory and Erikson's identity development theory suggest that changes in belief structures indicate changing perceptions of the self.

Peter Berger (1973) asserts that pluralization threatens religious beliefs and identities. Meanings behind religious symbols are validated through an unchanging social experience that confirms particular views. However, Berger explains that in a pluralistic environment,

> The individual is forced to take cognizance of others who do not believe what he believes and whose life is dominated by different, sometimes by contradictory, meanings, values and beliefs. As a result...pluralization has a secularizing effect. That is, pluralization weakens the hold of religion... on the individual (p. 80).

How the college environment is being characterized, "pluralistic" or otherwise, would depend on how students' perceive it. These perceptions may differ according to various aspects of the college environment and the extent to which differing views are confronted.

In sum, my propositions that guide this study are based on the notions that during the college years, students begin to take responsibility for their own personal beliefs. These developmental changes in students' beliefs are largely accounted for by students' interaction with the college environment. These social environments would likely differ

according to the students' perceptions. Despite differences in perceptions, however, it is expected that the relationships between beliefs and self-perceptions can be identified.

Research Questions

The overarching question to this study is as follows: **How do students' perceptions of the college environment affect their religious identity?** In order for the research question to permit exploration but maintain reasonable boundaries, sub-questions include the following:

- How do students define and interpret their college experience?
- How do they perceive and process their college experiences as influencing their religious identifications?

Methodology

Overall Approach and Rationale

Much remains unknown regarding how the multiple activities and perceived experiences within the college environment relate to a student's sense of his/her religious self. Narrative inquiry provides the necessary access and tools to uncover members' perceptions, beliefs, and inner processes about themselves and their environment. Narratives also reflect how tellers reconstruct processes to fit their current perceptions. Using both in-depth interviews and narrative inquiry, I investigated various perceptions of the self and the community among college undergraduates.

Site and Population Selection

This study was conducted at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), a large public research university, where I am a graduate student. The UCLA setting and

its student population are ideal because of its diversity. Besides the wide range of academic programs and campus resources, UCLA is known for its diverse ethnic and cultural student population.

In order to gain access, I solicited volunteers from two undergraduate classes within the Department of Education. I explained that I am seeking to interview students that have experienced a change or drop from any religion. Interestingly, each of the four volunteers was at one time Catholic. This sample of students consisted of three females and one male. Two identified themselves as Latino/a, one as Asian American, and one as Multi-ethnic (Mexican, German, Irish, and half African American). All four students were raised Catholic and either claim to no longer be Catholic or identify themselves as less Catholic. My goal was not to compare between genders, ethnicities, or other individual attributes, due to the small sample size. Rather, I expect common themes across various characteristics and backgrounds will emerge, in order that any findings will not be attributable to only one type of student. Any findings among a diverse group of students will provide general findings regarding the college experience, more than regarding one racial group or gender. Pseudonyms are used for the purposes of anonymity.

Uncovering Meaning through Narratives

My main interests were in describing the inner processes by which individuals interpret their perceived realities. Narratives serve this purpose. Narratives offer a look into the individuals' meanings that are associated with the events. Narratives provide "a language as a lens, a vehicle through which the world is seen" (Gergen, 1994). Through the lens of narrative, I was able to understand the world as it is seen through the perspectives of various individuals. Berger (1973) writes,

> In order to understand the everyday reality of any human group, it is not enough to understand the particular symbols or interaction patterns of individual situations. One must also understand the overall structural meaning within which these particular patterns and symbols are located and from which they derive their collectively shared experience (p. 63).

In other words, an understanding of the how one's social life-world is perceived and interpreted is fundamental to the sociological analysis of experiences and events.

Narratives are most appropriate in studies of identity. Theories about identity are embedded in individuals' interpretations of reality (Berger, 1967, p. 174). People tell stories about their life, revelations of their identity as reflexive constructions of themselves (Young, 1989). For these reasons, narrative inquiry provides sufficient validity.

This logic especially applies in regards to the changing religious self. From a social psychological perspective, religious identity and perceptions of the religious community are not easily separated. By adopting or disengaging from a religious identity, one's world becomes displaced with another (Berger, 1967). Thus, one social reality is replaced by another social reality. Furthermore, the old reality must be reinterpreted within the new reality. According to Berger (1967), this involves a reinterpretation of past biography, following the logic "Then I thought...now I know" (p. 160). That is, a change in worldviews requires new explanation of past religious beliefs because one set of beliefs can not be completely replaced by another. Rather, former religious views must be negotiated by present religious views. This intercourse includes a reinterpretation of the meaning of past events, perceptions, and self-definitions. Berger also asserts that individuals "may fabricate and insert events where they are needed to harmonize the remembered with the reinterpreted past" (p. 160). Subjectively, the individual is not lying, but is bringing a perceived truth that negotiates the present with

the past. Thus, narratives provide the most appropriate means of access into these perceived realities.

Data Gathering Method and Analysis

This qualitative study was conducted through two sets of interviews and narrative inquiries per student. The questions throughout the study centered around the changing perceptions of religion, which included perceptions of one's past and present religious identity, past and present perceptions of one's environment, and the linkages between one's religious identity and environment. Informal interviews in the beginning provided some relevant background information. In-depth interviews and narrative inquiries were the primary methods in answering the main research question: **How do Catholic students' perceptions of the college environment affect their sense of religious self?**

From the onset, I explained to each participant that I was interested in his/her religious experience from *his/her point of view*. Each of the interviews began with elicitations on the participants' early recollections of their religious upbringing. Experiences during college followed gradually at the subjects' own pace. Riessman (1993) suggests less structure, particularly in narrative inquiry, in the interest of giving more control to the respondents. Therefore, I had broad topics in mind, while trying to maintain flexibility in the sequence of topics and allowing other unexpected topics to arise (see Appendix for general interview protocol).

For each transcript, I focused on the unique processes for each individual. As each life is unique, so will be the emerging themes. Though each experience is unique, the shared themes provide expressions of how perceptions are explained to others (Kaufman, 1986). Themes, then, as realized experience are the "building blocks of identity" (Kaufman, 1986, p. 26). Thus, I also noted any recurring themes, or patterns of

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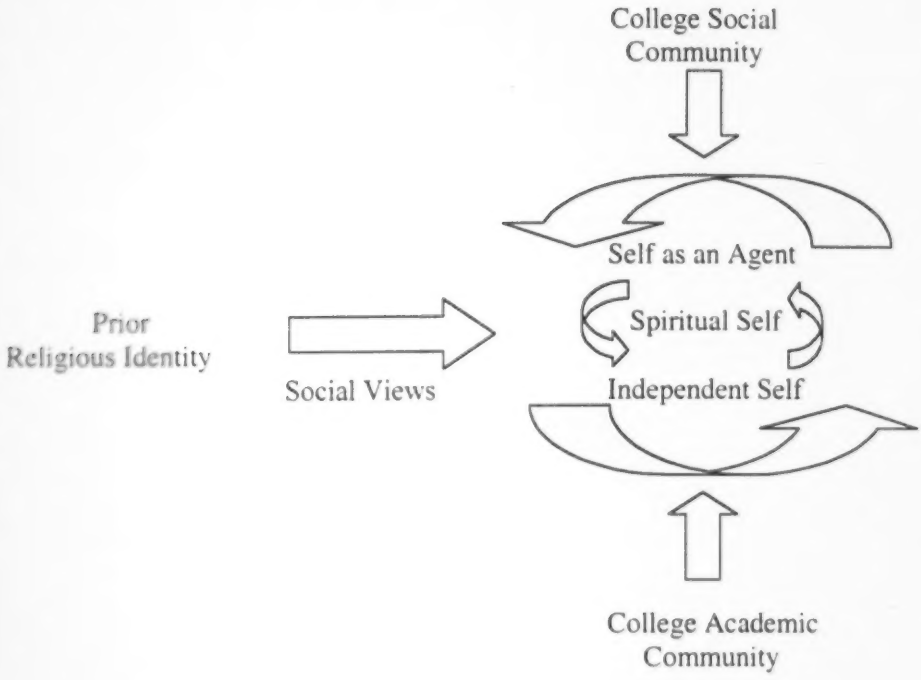
behavior and relationships, which provided the basis for further questions and analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

I examined the narratives within each of the interviews. Using Labov's (1997) structural approach for narrative analysis, I observed the following common narrative components: abstract (summary), orientation (time, place, situation, participants), complicating action (sequence of events), evaluation (significance and meaning of the action), resolution (what finally happened), and coda (returns perspective to the present). I especially paid attention to the evaluative statements regarding the religious self and the environment, which provided the underlying meanings and interpretations in addressing the research question.

Findings

Based on the interview analyses, several common themes emerged. The following sections will describe each of the main themes and how they address the topic of interest for the study. First, students' impressions of the college environment will be explained. Their perceptions of college focused on two areas, their social community (i.e., peer group) and their academic community (i.e., classroom). Both of these aspects of college directly and indirectly affected their changing religious identification. In addition, through interaction with the environment, students defined their social views, which often led to greater questioning of their Catholic faith. Finally, students discussed how each of these aspects affected their sense of self. Namely, themes of an independent self and the self as an agent emerged from the interviews, as a context for their redefined religious or spiritual self. The following model depicts the major themes and the linkages between them.



Perceptions of College

Students' descriptions of their environment provide the context and processes for their changing religious self-perceptions. In the following sections, I will describe their environment in two areas, their social community and their academic community. These perceptions present the situations and the conditions by which their religious identities were subject to change.

Social Community

When asked how they perceive the college campus, each of the four students described it as diverse. Views on the diversity of the university were specifically made in reference to the composition of the student body, in comparison to their respective high schools. Students described their high school communities as having less cultural variation. Lisa explains, "up to high school I thought that everybody was Catholic... everybody went to church...and that was the only way." In regards to her social

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community in high school, Nancy said, "My closest friends went to my church. I didn't encounter anybody else that was different." She associated familiarity and closeness with similar belief systems. She did recall having one Jehovah's Witness friend in high school, whom she disagreed with, "I was like no, that's not right. My religion's right." Unable to cope with this internal tension, Nancy decided to not talk about religion for the sake of preserving their friendship. By confronting a conflicting religious belief, she viewed the friendship as being jeopardized. Students' pre-college environments were often described as homogeneous and provided a safe, unquestioning environment. Confrontations with divergent religious views, such as in Nancy's example, were seldom integrated, but quickly dismissed.

Upon entering the university, Nancy and others discussed their initial feelings of isolation and sadness. Some described the loneliness of being apart from their friends and family members, while feeling disconnected from the students on campus. Such negative emotions may have been a consequence of being in a social environment that was perceived as dissimilar to their peer groups at home.

However, upon making friends in college, students adjust and become accustomed to encountering differing viewpoints. Nancy discussed how the students in her dormitory spoke of religion. "They questioned everybody's religion... and I was starting to think yea, mine is not that great." Helen talked also about her exposure to different religions through her interactions with her college peers. She then talked about how such discussions led her to question her own religious beliefs and practices. "they always questioned it...the formal process of going to church, standing up for certain readings, sitting down, kneeling...I never really used to think about that...when I'm doing it, I'm like questioning why...why am I praying over and over?" Lisa echoed

similar doubts upon encountering varying views. She explained, "starting in college... you're talking with your friends and you meet a lot of people with different experiences and different backgrounds and they are curious ...you try to explain it and you realize you can't...you don't really have an explanation for what you are doing." Nancy also said, "[Coming to college] changed everything. I encountered new ideas, new thinking, and the dorms, they're like I'm a Jew or I'm a Christian, and this is how we do it...its just one." In this statement, Nancy refers to "one" as the various religions being the same, or having the same essential core values of goodness and a belief in a higher being. Each of these students both shared how their doubts surfaced as a result of confronting peers with dissimilar views. They became less secure about their beliefs as they felt unable to defend their religious views to non-Catholics.

Beyond the variety of student backgrounds and cultures, the participants also described the student body as very similar in terms of academic achievement. One student explained, "In high school you were in the top 5-10% of your class and here, you're just like everybody else. Everybody is in the top 5-10% of their class. There's a huge difference. You're no longer the big fish." Again, this comparison is made in relation to her high school environment. The students would emphasize the diversity of cultures, while acknowledging the narrowing of similarities in academic achievement.

Perceptions of the environment as culturally diverse but academically similar led to new ways of thinking and understanding religion. In college, students encounter varying beliefs and within their religious discussions, they feel compelled to explain their beliefs as logical, reasonable, and intelligent. No longer are their religions understood as unquestionable truths. Rather, religion became a subjective way of perceiving reality, based upon one's upbringing. Their subjectivism redefines religion as opinions that can

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potentially be dismissed. For example, Helen describes the process of being exposed to countering views as "open[ing] my mind." She described a time when she was challenged by a friend to defend her religious stance. Consequently, she remembers thinking, "Well, is this Catholic religion really true then? There's these cracks...in [the Catholic religion]. I just questioned it, but my faith in the religion...began to get shaky." She describes another discussion with her boyfriend, who disagreed with Catholicism. In their discussions, he would point out contradictions in the bible. She explained, "He was telling me this fact and it comes from a history book. It was hard for me to argue and say something back to defend why I was like that." Though her boyfriend also had a Catholic background, she explained that as he continued to question his faith, she also began to doubt her own.

Academic Community

Other aspects of college that were commonly evaluated included the scheduling options and the variety of courses. The "freedom" to select courses provided a sense of empowerment and individuality. Lisa explained the transition from high school and college as liberating, "I think freedom is a huge deal. You go from a house that has set rules and curfews and bed times and study times, and everything else to do. Having to decide for yourself what works for you..." In comparing his schedule to high school, Robert explained, "Just like the choices that I had, that my class schedule wasn't being dictated to me and that there were 10 classes that would meet a certain requirement. I had the ability to be able to have choice on what I wanted to learn and not have it dictated to me." Robert also compared his instructors in high school with those in college as differing positions of power as he describes the banking system. In high school, sources of power were within the teacher as he describes, "the [high school] teachers would just

tell me and give me the information like I was the empty jar and they were all like powerful." In contrast, his college learning experience was explained as "more of a give and take type learning experience." Through the freedom to create his own schedule as well as opportunities to participate as an active learner in the classroom, Robert differentiates his college experiences as opportunities to exercise his own will.

Robert also talked about the impact of his philosophy classes. In his Introduction to Philosophy course, his professor incorporated varying spiritual beliefs, "a lot of Buddhism, a lot of Native American philosophy, a lot of African philosophy… and mixed into all the different types of philosophies were different spiritual beliefs." Robert explained that his philosophy courses provided "validity" for different religions, which led him to choose courses that also legitimized various views. Consequently, "I ditched the whole kinda if something good happens to me God gave it to me or whatever and if something bad happens to me its because the devil made me do it." For Robert, individual agency and personal responsibility became a more intelligent and reasonable perceptions of reality. Moreover, he began to view the self as an active subject, as opposed to a passive object.

For Lisa, her classes exposed her to various views that sometimes criticized religion. "I had this class…the teacher was very feminist…she believed that religion was a way to tear down women because women could never achieve the hierarchy in the religion… they would expose me to different arguments behind everything just through classes." She further explained how her college experience allowed her to broaden her beliefs, "its not so much you believe one thing, its just that you don't know anything else and I think that in college, especially UCLA has exposed me to that." The generalized

usage of "you" further indicates her perceptions of this exposure as a general phenomenon than her own unique experience.

Social Views

Each of the students stated tensions in regards to their Catholic views which they were raised and larger global issues of morality and ethics. According to the students, these conflicts were directly related to their weakening Catholic faith. For the most part, students "realized" where they stood on particular social issues and then shared how these views were contrary to Catholic teachings. Students expressed their stands on issues regarding abortion, women's roles, homosexuality, premarital sex, and the death penalty. According to them, their social views became a more important determinant of their identity, as opposed to their religion. Upon realizing their belief as contrary to Catholic beliefs, they questioned their Catholic identity. Lisa explains, "One of the things that got me to question my religion is that I'm pro-choice…I think that women should have the ability to decide what's right for them." Views on abortion are sometimes realized through direct experiences in college. Lisa struggled over an assigned paper in which she had to take a stand on whether abortion should be legalized or not. It was a difficult paper to write because she felt she had never "confronted" the issue before. She eventually saw a tutor who advised that she list and compare the differing views. Based on this suggestion, Lisa found her reasons for pro-choice outweighed her reasons against it. In response to her changed views, she then explains, "I know what I definitely believe in and Catholicism doesn't fit in."

Robert also described his newfound views on abortion and women's roles as an actualization of his beliefs. He stated, "My belief on abortion, I would never sit there and say, this is what my belief is and question it. I kinda went along with it. Ok, this is what

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I should believe because I am Catholic." He then explains that through his interactions with his professors and college peers, he began to perceive his former views as "wrong." In addition, he recognized "contradictions" in theological teachings, "whereas before I felt like I had to believe this doctrine…it has to be right if my church says so."

Nancy more clearly attributes her changing feminist views to her courses. She describe a particular class, "There's a lot of feminists [saying], 'We've go to stand up for ourselves.'" Her liberalized views of women's roles were made evident in contrast to her family's traditional Catholic life. Nancy explains, "First you've got to honor your husband, whoever you marry. And serve him, serve your family. And at first, I was like yeah…there's no way out, I have to cook, I have to clean before I come to school…And [now] I'm like no, why should I do it? My brother should help me do it."

Self-perceptions

All of the students acknowledged that their sense of religious self did change as a result of college. They compared how they perceive themselves now, in comparison to how they used to be, as well as how they would be if they attended a college within the same neighborhood that they were raised. Lisa, for example, states,

> I think its that more of my realization but I think it has to do with my surroundings. Like I think that everything has to do with um, affected the way I am speaking now. Like I think if I stayed home, like at [name of hometown college]…I wouldn't have stayed as focused because I would've been around the same people and I would have thought the same thoughts.

The other students iterated similar sentiments: they all noted their newly formulated identities as progressive, or as advancing from their prior religious selves. Having a matured sense of self was evident as Lisa compared herself to her high school friends who remained in their immediate neighborhoods. She commented, "They're exactly the

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same; they didn't move... there's definitely a maturity difference." In considering how she would have identified herself if she remained at home, she stated, "I think I would be like I was in high school. Like my parents would make me live at home and just be like home and school...I would be going to church every Sunday and my friends would be the same."

In addition to the direct and indirect influences of going to college on their changing sense of religious self, the students also described other aspects of the self that also affected their redefined religious, or spiritual, identity. Perceptions of the self as independent and as an agent emerged as coupled contextual identifications to their changing religious identity. These interrelated self-definitions are further detailed in the following sections.

The Self as an Agent

Perhaps the most notable commonalties throughout the narrations in college were the usage of the self as an agent, or active participant. For Robert, his decisions to take additional philosophy and literature classes did not *happen to him*. Instead, he actively decided to take particular courses. After taking his first philosophy class, he chose to take additional courses that resounded with his less religious views. In contrast, each of the students described themselves as objects when talking about their Catholic upbringing. In these narrations, the active participant was either their mother or grandmother. For example, Lisa shared, "I was raised Catholic. I remember very distinctly my mother running around Sunday morning, trying to get my brothers and me dressed for church." Lisa's description of her Catholic upbringing assumed that her mother was the primary participant in Lisa's religious faith. However, as the students narrated their experiences in college, the main actors were themselves.

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Occasionally, other main actors were incorporated into the narrations, as opponent to the students' viewpoints. Nancy shared a story about her Catholic aunt, who refused medical treatment for her dying uncle, as a form of spiritual faith. For Nancy, her aunt was the epitome of Catholic wrongdoing, "I was like, 'Why are you so closed-minded? Religion makes you so closed minded that you can't even think right.' " Nancy blames her aunt for her uncle's eventual death; "She killed her husband." In this narration, her dying uncle was explained as the passive participant, whereas she and her aunt were both active subjects, though having divergent beliefs. Nancy not only divorced herself from Catholic views, but also the individuals that hold them.

The Independent Self

I asked each of the students how they perceive themselves now in comparison to their high school years. Common descriptors were "independent," "self-reliant," and "open." Robert elaborates, "In one word I am more tolerant and open...I am more willing to change whereas before I felt like I had to believe this and this doctrine." Students commonly perceived themselves as individuals with the ability to construct their own opinions and ideas.

Lisa expressed similar views and added, "[In high school] we believed what we believed because that is what we grew up with and not necessarily because we thought about it. It was mostly regurgitation." Lisa also acknowledges though going to college has given her a greater sense of individualization and empowerment to question her previous ideas, she also explains that she is less certain about her exact beliefs. She says,

> I think I was a lot more sure of my thoughts and beliefs back then. Now I feel like I have a new empowerment to question my beliefs. I think that just comes from growth, from writing papers for classes. You learn not to just take your research as just 'the bible'. I realize that not all of religion can be proved but at the same time I think that just the foundation of it

> should have some more background, you know. But I think I went from something more sure and solid to 'hmm, I wonder if that is really true or I wonder if I really think that.'

Interestingly, Lisa admits that she is less certain about her beliefs than in high school, but also explains that her viewpoints are more clearly defined. At one point, she states, "I think if I didn't go to UCLA or if I stayed in [name of her hometown] I wouldn't have been stuck w/o opinions." However, she later states, "I'm very pro-choice. I believe in the death penalty and those are things that the Catholic Church is strongly against. I think I've developed my own opinions and I think that sometimes they stray from the Catholic religion." It seems Lisa's social views have become her own, because of college. In addition, her religious views remain unclear, as she negotiates how her social views relate to her religious beliefs. She resolves this inner conflict by stating, "I'm very much more open to other beliefs and unsure of my own religion but taking the initiative to question it and find out what I believe." Here, Lisa is taking her newfound social values and ways of making decisions in order to find out how her religious views connect to her sense of self. In contrast to her previous narration of her Catholic upbringing, Lisa assumes personal responsibility in determining her religious identity.

Nancy's sense of religious self has also become more independent. In describing her past self, she explained, "I kinda took everything for granted because ever since I was young I would always be obedient. I would always do what my parents wanted." She then talks about her present self by describing a more recent encounter with her mother explaining, "I [was] kinda like answering back to like everything [my mom] says... and she's like no, you know, UCLA is changing you. You're different." She later explains how this behavior was "not Catholic." She said, "The priest [said] 'you're not supposed

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to like answer back to your parents. You're not supposed to do that because that's a sin.' To me, it's not a sin. To me its like saying, 'no, I'm gonna do this.' " Nancy holds her newfound views as contradictory to the Catholic religion. As opposed to changing her views, her religious beliefs were questioned. She describes herself as such, "I'm like an individual. I'm like an alone individual that if I get to know people cool, but if not, ok, whatever." By this statement, Nancy expresses how her sense of self is less tied to a specific group, but by her own uniqueness.

The Spiritual Self

In discussing their current views on spirituality, each of the students described themselves as less Catholic or non-Catholic. They indicated a lesser allegiance to the Catholic Church, but maintain a belief in God, or a higher being. 'Lisa exemplifies the students' sentiments in her statement, "I don't know what or who or anything like that but I do believe in something higher and I do believe in life after death and that I guess it's the basis of Catholic religion and believe in it still but maybe not all the beliefs." Lisa has not yet decided whether she is Catholic and continues to contemplate how or whether she will identify herself as Catholic.

Nancy swayed back and forth between her religious stance. At one point, she described herself as Catholic, and in other points of the interviews, she expressed her undecidedness. Like Lisa, Nancy also believes in God, but is less sure about whether she is a devout member of the Catholic Church. She shared that she continues to pray occasionally and lives according to her own sense of right and wrong. She disagrees with the church's mandates on continual confessionals and need for all of its religious observances. Nancy attributes college to making her a "stronger person." She follows this statement by saying, "Not to believe what people say, [but] kinda like build my own

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beliefs instead of [pause] I'll grab something what I like about one belief and I grab something of another thing and kinda like construct my own belief, not just kinda like saying yes to everything my parents says or yes to everything the priest says. College has made me a stronger person." In this brief narration, Nancy attributes "strength" with her ability to make individual choices for herself. Nancy redefines her own religion by constructing her beliefs by what she is exposed towards. More specifically, she attributes this strength to living away from home, "Like in the dorms and then going to classes, encountering new people, new ideas, conversations that let me know there's other beliefs not just Catholic or Mexican...there's other people out there and they have religions too and they have beliefs and grasp a little bit of each one you know." Nancy's spiritual self is largely based on her self-perceptions as an individual with personal agency.

Unlike the other students, Robert more clearly disassociates himself from the Catholic faith and expresses his spirituality in a self-defined way. He states, "I didn't have to say that I was Catholic to be spiritual and that I could take something form a lot of religions and meld them into my own spirituality." By this statement, Robert reiterates Nancy's perceptions of creating her own self of spiritual self. He continues, "I saw in the teachings of Buddha and Native American spiritual beliefs kinda oneness with yourself and finding like strength and taking responsibility for what you do in you and not really an outside source that you give all the praise or blame to." For Robert, his source of newfound spirituality became internal, as opposed to God, or an outside force. However, he admits, "I still believe in a higher being...I think for a while I was thinking of considering myself an atheist...[but] I know that being Catholic would never play a part in who I am anymore. I do redefine religion." Robert continues to maintain his belief in a higher being, though he chose to redefine his religious sense of self as independent of

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an outside source of power, particularly in the Catholic God. Rather, he finds his source of strength from within, which is also attributed to his emphasis on the independent self with agency.

Among the students, Helen expressed the most allegiance to her Catholic identity, though she expressed continual uncertainties. She stated, "I'd still say I'm Catholic but that I'm non-practicing or actually right now I'm searching...I think I'm formally Catholic...right now I don't know what I want to be." She admitted feeling guilty for questioning her religious faith, which further led her to believe she is less Catholic. She expressed pangs of guilt for not only questioning, but also for not attending church or other Catholic practices. Consequently, she feels "less strong." Through her feelings of guilt and evaluations of her changing faith as being "less", Helen inadvertently evaluated her religious change as negative. In comparison to the other students who more clearly identified themselves as independent and as agents of change, Helen's self-perceptions were indeterminate. Her narrations often involved her peers as the primary actors, which may explain her continuing internal ties to her religious identity prior to college. On a possible spectrum of college impact on changing religious identities, Helen demonstrates an example of students who may be still be in process of redefining her religious identity or potentially in the process of reverting back to her former views.

Summary and Future Research

In light of the potential secularizing effects higher education might have on students' religious identity, this study aimed to uncover the underlying processes associated with this change. Based on both in-depth interviews and narrative inquiries, connections between emerging perceptions of the self and one's environment were examined. In sum, it was found that students' changing religious identity is directly

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related to perceptions of their college environment, namely their social community and their academic community. In addition, interaction with these communities affects students' social views, which also leads to a greater questioning of their prior religious beliefs. Based upon these forces, students redefine themselves in three major ways: the self as an agent of change, the self as an individual, and a redefined spiritual self, which incorporates some, but not all of their previous religious identity. These three self-perceptions are interrelated; views of the self as independent and as an agent further nurture a redefined spiritual self.

While this study focused on students who had identified themselves as Catholic, additional questions regarding the particulars of the Catholic faith and the possible directions of religious change are raised. Are particular aspects of Catholicism especially incongruent with attending a large public university, such as UCLA? How might the internal processes of change differ for students of different religious backgrounds? How do students who have remained Catholic, or maintained their religious identity, negotiate conflicting beliefs in college? And how does college serve to affirm or strengthen students' religious identities? While such issues are beyond the scope of this particular study, these questions should be considered in future related work. Despite the breadth of unexplored questions that have yet to be further investigated, this study provides a working model of better understanding the process of religious change.

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Appendix

Interview Guide #1: College experiences

1. Tell me about your first impressions of college as an entering freshman.
2. How have these impressions changed since you entered college?
3. How would you describe yourself during your freshman year? How would others have described you?
4. Who were the most important influences during your college years? Why?
5. How have your circle of friends changed during college? What were they like?
6. What were some of the more meaningful activities you shared with your friends? Why were these experiences important?
7. Imagine I was college student from another campus. How would you describe to me life at UCLA? How would you describe to me a typical UCLA undergraduate?
8. How would you describe yourself in comparison to a typical UCLA undergraduate?
9. How do you think UCLA has changed since you entered college? How has it remained the same?

Interview Guide#2: Religious Perceptions

1. What were your religious beliefs prior to entering college? Religious practices? Religious identity-ies?
2. How have these beliefs have changed during your college years? Practices? Self-perceptions?
3. How do/did you feel about those who disagree with your religion? Agree with your religion?
4. How do/did you feel about classes you are taking or have taken that might conflict with your beliefs?
5. Have there been times when you questioned your beliefs? If so, what were these doubts? How did you respond to them?
6. Do/did you have any religious mentors? What were they like?
7. Do you believe in an afterlife? How does that affect your life right now?